

HOW WELL DO FIRST YEAR HOSPITALITY MANAGEMENT STUDENTS ADJUST TO THE FIRST YEAR OF UNIVERSITY LIFE?

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ABSTRACT

In South Africa the graduation rate could be improved at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). There have been a number of First Year (FY) initiatives at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) to support first year students. This paper will explore if there is a relationship between the adjustment to first year and to the success rates of Hospitality Management (HM) students compared to those in the Faculty of Management and in the UJ. The mixed method research was to establish if a smaller focused group of first year students adjust to FY studies and university life quicker and better than their peers who are part of larger classes. The challenge is to ensure the First Year Extended (FYE) programme does assist students to be successful and improve their results, attitudes and coping mechanisms.

Keywords: First Year Experience, Hospitality Management Students, South Africa, Student Profile

INTRODUCTION

South Africa's higher education sector has had to contend with increasing numbers of first time entering students, falling success together with low retention rates and a tightened institutional budget (Jamelske, 2009). This phenomenon appears to be a global issue (Brinkworth, McCann, Matthews and Nordstrom, 2009; Fraser and Killen, 2005). South Africa is in a similar situation as the United States of America was in the 1960s and 1970s (Hunter, 2006) and Australia in the 1980s (McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001) where major changes were introduced to address the issues related to students entering post school studies for the first time. South Africa's experience of recent massification as well as an increase in a diverse student population follows a similar pattern. In the years since post-apartheid, South African higher education institutions have registered students from different cultures, school backgrounds, and a variety of home languages (South Africa has eleven official languages). The gap between school and university is real and enormous for most students (Brinkworth et al., 2009). The changes experienced from being a school learner to that of a university student may be immense and are generally challenging for most (Conway, 2004). Students often arrive without any idea of what to expect, many are underprepared and others are ill-suited for university study.

The move away from being told what to do to a situation of relative freedom (McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001) where it does not matter if one attends class or not, hands in assignments or not, being responsible for one's own social integration and academic achievements, being away from home for the first time, experiencing a huge institution compared to a small rural village, lack of family support or support of any form is all stressful, intimidating and challenging. Many are simply overwhelmed (Kidwell, 2005). Coping mechanisms are very individual and dependant on the person being motivated and having an intrinsic feeling of responsibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Any student entering a university for the first time has to face numerous challenges and adjustments (Conway, 2004; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001). In South Africa for many students this is exacerbated in that countless are from rural areas where the schooling may be sub-standard, they may be first generation students (in the UJ this is 58% (UJ Internal report, 2011)) with no idea of what to expect in a place of higher learning (Conway, 2004) or they attend lessons presented in a second language or they may have problems with accommodation and transport underpinned by limited finances or any other factor that impacts on students settling into university way of life, in particular handling the academic aspects and being successful (Cox Schmidt, Bobrowski and Graham, 2005; Heirdsfield, Walker, Waslch and Wilss, 2008). How does the higher education sector achieve good graduate retention and outputs given these factors that often contribute to many unsuccessful students that subsequently dropout? South African universities are addressing these issues in various ways.

Less than 50% of those who enrol graduate and not necessarily in the minimum time (Scott, Yeld and Hendry, 2007) Ascertaining what problems may be the underlying causes is an ongoing task; questions such as what motivates a student to succeed, what indicators suggest success (or lack of success), are there correlations between school leaving results and passing, what help are national placement tests (which are in their infancy stage in South Africa), class attendance, class size, first generation students, cultural differences, financial security, disadvantaged students and a host of other variables? In the last few years, it has become essential to implement better structured support for first years in the UJ. Each of these will not necessarily be discussed in this paper but may be mentioned as possibilities that may lead to poor first year retention and low success rates.

In South Africa there is a low participation rate in the Higher Education sector compared to other countries (Scott, et al., 2007). Approximately 30% of the students who enter the South African Higher Education system annually drop out during their first year of studies (Scott, et al., 2007). The high attrition rate results in less than 50% of the students who enrol for diplomas or degrees ever graduate and usually it takes them at least more than an additional year to do so. This high dropout rate results in a very substantial loss in financial subsidies to higher education institutions.

Many more students than ever before wish to enter universities as they believe there is a need to have a formal higher education qualification to be considered employable. Due to the enormous increase in the

number of applications, enrolment management is important to ensure that a university meets its targets both in student numbers and forecasted financial income. If student numbers drop then the obvious consequence is a loss of income and this translates into tightened operational budgets.

First year interventions have proliferated over the years due to the need to retain students and improve success rates by assisting incoming students to adjust to the unfamiliar academic environment that they find themselves in (Jamelske, 2009).

First year experience programmes commonly include topics such as (Cox et al., 2005; Heirdsfield, et al., 2008)

- Using academic language and writing effectively,
- How to use tutor sessions effectively,
- Computer proficiency,
- Use of the library,
- Skills such as time management, study skills, memory strategies, stress management, note taking and exam skills,
- Personal development and psycho-educational workshops which include conflict management, effective leadership, understanding diversity, adjusting to university life,
- Plagiarism and academic dishonesty,
- What and where certain support units are e.g. study support, personal psychological assistance, career guidance, and
- Institutional awareness (e.g. how does a university operate, the structure - such as where, what and who is the dean, contextualized terminology).

According to Cox, et al., (2005:42) there are four factors that are of relevance to academic success and retention rates. These are: “1) early and frequent interaction with faculty, staff and peers; 2) clearly communicated academic expectations and requirements; 3) learning opportunities that increase involvement with other students; and 4) academic, social and personal support. “

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The University of Johannesburg is a large urban higher education institution (HEI) located close to the city centre. It attracts young people from across the Gauteng province and from further afield including rural areas. Due to the wide variety of programmes offered, thousands of students submit applications in the hope of gaining a place. The UJ has close on 50000 registered students, making it one of the largest residential universities in South Africa. It offers both diploma and traditional degrees and the associated post graduate qualifications. There are nine faculties of which the Faculty of Management is one. Within this Faculty, there are nine departments and one of these is the Department of Hospitality Management in the School of Tourism and Hospitality (STH). In 2011 there are 116 first year students in the National Diploma (ND) Hospitality Management compared to 2267 first years within the Faculty itself.

In the first month before academic classes start, the first years have two weeks orientation, known as O!week (O = orientation as there is a perceived negative connotation attached to orientation) followed by registration and the start of the First Year Experience (FYE).

Over the years there have been a number of First Year initiatives within Faculties to support students to adjust to university life but these have been isolated. In the past two years the UJ has, like many other South African institutions of Higher Education (HE), developed a coherent approach for new first year students. Numerous South African students are first generation, are considered disadvantaged, are from the rural areas and have questionable secondary schooling results.

The UJ has encouraged all faculties to implement a First Year Experience programme during the first three academic weeks. In the Faculty of Management the generic first three sessions included: an introduction and how to prepare for a lesson; the actual lesson and finally how to make study notes during a lesson. This is followed by an extended FYE programme presented over the remaining eleven weeks of the semester. The FYE extended programme in the Faculty includes topics such as those listed previously.

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT FYE INITIATIVES

To try to improve the retention and graduation rates of first years, the Faculty of Management has a First Year Experience (FYE) committee where ideas and experiences are shared amongst first year lecturers. Each Department has at least one representative but other first year lecturers are encouraged to attend. The purpose of these meetings is to share good practice, new ideas, and techniques that seem to result in better success results.

Another initiative is a Faculty biannual seminar to share what has been successful in teaching of first year classes. A further project was to recognise and acknowledge first year lecturers who had motivated students to succeed. They were nominated by the top student achievers in each programme. This was to acknowledge teaching lecturers rather than researchers as so much emphasis is placed on research outputs.

A further project in the UJ is an “early warning tracking” system. Two departments in the Faculty of Management are involved in the pilot study to track students who did not pass the first test which is held within the first six weeks. Tutor classes are compulsory for these students and they must have an 80% attendance rate besides the necessary semester mark to gain entry to final assessment opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed method approach, using both qualitative and quantitative research was used to explore if there is a relationship between the adjustment to FY and ultimately to the success rates of Hospitality Management students compared to both those in the Faculty of Management and in the UJ. As part of the UJ FYE initiative it was decided to gather data on the actual student experience of the newly entering cohort. To facilitate this process an FYE working group developed the Initial Student Experience Survey (ISES) dur-

ing March 2010 (Appendix 1). The ISES was one page in length and consisted of 27 questions concerning the various aspects of the student experience.

PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

A total of 5940 first years responded. Of these 1144 were from the Faculty of Management and 111 were Hospitality Management (HM) students. All were from different cultural backgrounds, were both male and female and had a variety of educational and home backgrounds.

DATA COLLECTION

To ensure a representative sample 6500 questionnaires were distributed to a random sample of the approximately 14500 first year students entering the institution in 2011. The questionnaires were distributed by the various faculty representatives on the UJ FYE committee to ensure that students from all faculties and campuses were included. The questionnaires were disseminated and collected between week 5 and week 7 of the first semester. This time frame was selected to ensure an accurate representation of the actual student experience from the ISES. Of the 6500 questionnaires, 5940 were completed, returned and analysed.

Those handed to the Hospitality Management students were kept separate but anonymous, the purpose being to draw a comparison between these and the Faculty responses. During the same week of the completion of the ISES, the Hospitality Management students were handed a short but focused questionnaire about their FY experience specifically at the School of Tourism and Hospitality (STH). The questionnaire included five questions on a five point Likert scale; strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, unsure, somewhat agree, strongly agree. This was followed by four open ended questions, which asked them to respond to their most positive and negative experiences during both O!Week (orientation) and the specially designed FYE programme at the STH.

RESULTS

The ISES data was collected via a web-form feeding directly into a database. The results were compiled automatically and converted to an SPSS database. SPSS (v 19) was then used to draw a frequency analysis. The ISES data collection took place using physical questionnaires. The data-logging was done by hand resulting in an Excel spreadsheet prepared to be transferred to SPSS. The database was transferred to SPSS after which a frequency analysis was conducted. The questionnaires to the Hospitality Management students were manually captured due to the small number of responses.

Table 1 reflects the total number of first time entering students at the UJ, in the Faculty of Management and the Hospitality Management (HM) programme respectively. Included is the number of students who responded to the questionnaire: 5940 of the first year UJ cohort of students, of which 1144 were from the Faculty of Management, this is 53% of the possible first years registered in the Faculty and 111 (96%) Hospitality Management students.

	UJ	Faculty of Management (excluding HM)	HM
n = Total UJ first years registered for the first time	12557	2151	116
n = First year students respondents to the questionnaire	5940	1144	111

Table 1: Number of First Year registered students and number of responses

Table 2 shows responses to 14 of the 27 questions in the Initial Student Experience Survey (ISES) for the UJ, the Faculty of Management and the Hospitality Management students. These particular answers were selected for reporting purposes as it is suggested that they are directly related to the success of first year students (Cox et al., 2005). The questions that are not commented upon were to do with aspects such as whether the respondent would recommend the UJ to others, would choose the UJ again, do you feel at home, and how far you have to travel each day (see appendix 1 for the full list of questions) and indirectly relevant to the FYE. Many of these are as important to student success (Cox et al., 2005).

	UJ		Faculty of Management (excluding HM)		HM	
Question	% Yes	% No	% Yes	% No	% Yes	% No
Did you attend orientation sessions in the two weeks before classes?	68	32	55	45	64	36
Have you made friends at UJ yet?	90	10	89	11	89	11
Do you feel at home at UJ yet?	70	30	70	30	66	34
Do you understand how the university works?	81	19	81	19	82	18
Have you personally spoken to one or more of your lecturers?	52	48	48	52	52	48
Do you understand what the lecturers expect of you?	87	13	88	12	79	21
Are you worried about your semester tests?	76	24	75	25	79	21
Would you like some orientation activities to be repeated later in the year?	48	52	55	45	38	62

Table 2: Answers to Initial Student Experience Survey

Originally it was thought that the HM students would reflect higher positive responses to the questions due to them being a smaller group, with direct contact to staff rather than being one of a much larger group, but the results reflect a very similar outcome except for the HM students having a lower feeling of being at home at the UJ (66% compared to the 70% for UJ and the FM students). The other result to note is that of the 38% of HM students suggesting that they would not like the orientation activities to be repeated. This may be due to the weekly lecture which has shown to be unpopular (see table 7). One would

need to establish what the problem is here otherwise success of such a programme will be compromised. Establishing if students understand how the university works and what is expected of individuals was generally recorded as over 80% except for the HM students at 79%. Clearly communicated expectations have also shown to be a reason for higher academic success (Cox et al., 2005).

	UJ		Faculty of Management (excluding HM)		HM	
	% good/ very good	% average	% good/ very good	% average	% good/ very good	% average
How was your total experience at UJ till now?	57	37	56	38	66	32
How did you experience the orientation?	58	42	60	30	52	41

Table 3: Experience at UJ and during orientation

Table 3 reflects the responses which focused on the students' good or bad experiences during orientation. Of the students in the Faculty of Management, 628 of those who responded to the questionnaire, indicated that they attended orientation, of which 60% said they found it to be a good experience, and 30% found it to be average. The other results are similar except for the HM students who had a lower score of 52%. Table 4 shows the number of hours that a student gives to study time after classes and table 5 reflects the number of classes and tutorials they have missed in a normal academic week. The greatest number of the HM students (32%) only spend 2 hours per day studying but the next highest is 15 % who study for 4 hours per day. Most (76%) students across all three categories were concerned about the first test that was to be written (Table 2). Are students aware of the amount of time required for writing summaries, preparing for tests, compiling assignments and whatever else is required?

How many hours per day outside of class time do you study	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	9
% Hospitality students	14	12	32	9	15	11	5	1	1

Table 4: Number of study hours per day after class

The HM students on the whole attend more classes and tutorials in a week (0 classes missed 63% and 65% respectively) than those in the Faculty (52% and 50%) (Table 5). This could be due to the small classes as their absence will be noticed, especially in practical lessons; these are difficult to catch up as they are not repeated and are five hours in length.

n = number of classes in a normal week missed	0	1	2	3	4	> 4
% Faculty of Management students	52	28	13	2	2	3
% of Hospitality Management students	63	17	16	2	2	0
n = number of tutorials in a normal week missed						
% Faculty of Management students	50	30	13	4	1	2
% Hospitality Management students	65	21	9	4	1	0

Table 5: Number of classes and tutorials missed in an academic week

Survey to the Hospitality Management students

Table 6 reflects the responses of the independent survey given to the Hospitality Management students. Completion was optional which resulted in a 57% response rate (66 of the 116 students). The purpose was to establish if these students had settled in better, due to them being in a smaller group with personal contact with lecturers rather than just a student amongst a large number of others. All students in the Faculty of Management had three sessions of two hours of FYE during the first three weeks of the academic calendar. This was followed by one scheduled FYE lesson of fifty minutes per week for the next 8 weeks (incomplete at the time of the survey) specifically for the purpose of assisting them to cope with university life.

	n= Strongly disagree	n = somewhat disagree	n= Unsure	n = Somewhat agree	n = Strongly agree
I attend at least 80% of all my classes	2	0	2	9	51
I am motivated by my peers / classmates	4	7	14	23	18
My behaviour is influenced by my classmates	18	14	14	17	3
I prefer working in groups when doing class projects	17	16	7	13	11
After 6 weeks, I have adjusted well to the academic activities at the STH	0	4	9	30	23

Table 6: Results of the independent questionnaire for Hospitality Management students

Most of the students (somewhat agree + strongly agree = 60%) indicated they attend most of their classes. Attendance is frequently cited as a strong indicator that students will be successful, especially during the first term of study. Only 13% were either unsure or disagree somewhat that they have not adjusted well to university life. It will be useful to compare the first test results and then the semester results once these are available with this response.

The peer and group involvement questions were to establish if individuals are motivated by peers as well as what effect classmates have on their behaviour. Cox et al., (2005) cited several authors that the FY students who are involved with their peers, achieve at better rates in learning and performance. A strong network supports and encourages class mates to succeed.

The research also was to establish if being in a smaller department there is any influence of peers and how this may have affected the success rate of the first years. It was found that many of the students said that they are motivated by their peers although they were not very sure or disagreed that the peers did not influence their class behaviour. Most of them preferred to work independently rather than doing group work.

Table 7 reflects the results of the open ended questions which were grouped into a number of general headings and resulted in the following responses:

It was evident from the answers that the students did not know the difference between orientation and the First Year Experience held by the STH. Many of the comments in the orientation question alluded to activities and experiences at the STH although these were two distinct happenings and held at totally different times in the first two months. Nevertheless the answers are reflected as given by the students.

Orientation was held over two weeks and was known as O!week. Activities included the dean's welcome; three sessions of computer training and finally registration. The students do not need to attend every day but according to the scheduled programme.

Comments	%Orientation	%FYE
Did not like it and found it to be a waste of time	6	15
Did not attend	18	15
Welcome - information motivated and helped them	23	N/A
Support - Academic matters such as time management, study methods and general support	41	50
Social - Meeting new people, friends and new classmates, games and activities	30	18
No response	0	2

Table 7: What was your most positive experience during Orientation and during FYE at the STH?

In table 7 where the questions were about positive experiences, it is disappointing to note that the FYE was less positive than general orientation although 50% of the students did indicate that the academic topics presented during the FYE and 41% of the information on support services was positive. The welcome and information was received positively by 23% of the students and 30% of the social events were enjoyed and helped students to get to know each other. This could be considered positive as students who do not fit in and feel alienated struggle with academic work (Palmer et al., 2009; Sherony, Sklar and Steinhaus, 2010) and making friends goes a long way to adjusting to the new environment.

Comments from students	%Orientation	%FYE
No negative experience	52	35
Too long and boring	14	27
Lack of signage and so got lost	3	0
Did not attend	9	2
Attitudes and behaviour of others not participating	15	17
Information overload or useless information	0	17
No response	7	2

Table 8: What was your most negative experience during Orientation and during FYE at the STH?

Table 8 provides the results of the negative experiences of the Hospitality Management students of which 52% and 35% respectively did not have a bad time during these two periods. It is discouraging to have 14% and 27% of the HM students reflect respectively that the two programmes were too long and boring. Seventeen percent of the students mentioned that there was information overload or it was useless to them, and the behaviour and attitudes of their peers impacted negatively on the programme.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was to compare if the HM students that are selected by means of interviews, who are in smaller classes which is a more personal environment rather than in a really large class of over 200 students and who pay a higher course fee would be more successful in adjusting to university life than to those who are merely a student in a large class. Showing the students a caring environment and developing a closer relationship with lecturers has shown to have positive results (Sherony, et al., 2010). These authors also found that students who interact with each other and get to know each other due to the smaller class groups, show confidence and are motivated to be successful, thus increasing retention rates (Erikson, Stone and Weber, 2010). The HM students did acknowledge that the social activities were positive and obviously were enjoyed by them. It is mentioned that early and regular interaction with academic staff and peers is instrumental in students being successful in their first year (Cox et al., 2005). This should be a positive result in HM as the groups are smaller and interaction with lecturers is immediate.

Lecturers do need to take the current first time entering students' situation into consideration and adapt their traditional classroom approaches to suit the diverse student intake (Scott et al., 2007). It is essential that the educational process is improved in order to retain students and increase graduation rates (Jamel-ske, 2009; Scott, et al., 2007). This is not only to add skilled people into the workplace, but good retention figures also attract top students, (Jamelske, 2009) and promote the reputation of the institution (Palmer, O'Kane and Owens, 2009).

An actual weekly FYE lecture together with the use of tutors is cited as being a positive contributor to FY success. Mentors or teaching assistants are an important help with academic marking of tests and assignments, taking registers and general administrative factors (Cox et al., 2005). However it would seem that

the lecturers need to be trained and informed as to the best methodology of imparting FYE topics (Jamelske, 2009). The FYE program would improve if staff were more willing to change their class presentation styles. Their understanding of the student profile is important and should direct them to developing interesting and interactive lectures.

The results did not show much difference in whether the students were in a large class group or smaller, but as Jamelske (2009) suggested, it is important to students to be socially integrated and be involved in campus activities. The interaction with staff is also important for good retention rates and ultimately should translate in an increase in graduate output. The results all reflect similar percentages for the three different groupings. It had been expected that the smaller, more personal class groups would settle in quicker, utilize the FY classes to their benefit and ultimately have better results. As the first test results are not available these will have to be included at a later stage for further analysis. The only result of any noted difference is that of repeating orientation activities later in the year. The HM students were of the opinion that they did not wish this to happen. Is this because they have had very specific time devoted to the FY activity or is it because they are a select group of students who have better academic schooling and so are better at adjusting to a new environment or are more confident as the profile of a hospitality student usually is that of being outgoing and secure? It would be worth including their final school results to establish if there is any correlation between the three groups. The assessment results in the first semester and then again at the end of the year should also be used as a variable.

South Africa is in need of good graduates who are able to find employment. Presently this does not seem to be the situation as the retention rate at universities is low (Scott et al., 2007) even though there are numerous initiatives to assist students there still remains a high dropout rate. Academic success is not always due to lack of ability but can be due to socio-economic factors such as a shortage of finance, transport and home circumstances such as parents getting divorced, or a family member dying (Scott et al., 2007). Although universities are providing programmes to help first time entering students to adjust to university life, there are factors that are external to the HE sector such as the often inadequate schooling system (Scott et al., 2007) that prevent success. Even if the number of first time entering students is increased, it does not necessarily mean that student success will increase.

Strengthening of the FYE program, even to the extent that credits are awarded should be considered. According to Conway (2004) getting to know the students and recognizing that each one has individual needs; social interactions; tracking attendance and first test results to establish problems as early as possible should all be included in a retention strategy.

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APPENDIX 1



Your first experience @ UJ

First Year Experience

D-RING 3

Auckland Park Kingsway Campus

Dear student, please answer the following questions honestly by making a X in the appropriate box for each question. The questionnaire is anonymous and no one will be able to trace these answers to you. The results will be used to evaluate the experience of our first year students during their first few weeks.

1. Do you agree to take part in this research?.....

Yes	No
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2. In which faculty are you enrolled?

FEFS	Health	Management	Science	Engineering FEBE	FADA	Law	Humanities	Education
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3. On which UJ campus do you attend class?.....

APK	APB	DFC	SWC
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4. Is this your first year at UJ?.....

Yes	No
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5. Please rate your total experience here at UJ up to now.

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
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6. Would you still have chosen to study at UJ if you had to choose again?.....

Yes	No
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7. Did you attend the orientation sessions in the two weeks before classes started?.....

Yes	No
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8. If yes, how did you experience the orientation?.....

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
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9. If no, why did you not attend it?

10. How did you experience the registration process?.....

Very poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
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11. Have you made friends at UJ yet?.....

Yes	No
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12. Do you feel at home at UJ yet?.....

Yes	No
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13. Have you attended or taken part in any sports events at UJ yet?.....

Yes	No
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14. Have you attended or taken part in any cultural activities at UJ yet?.....

Yes	No
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15. Do you understand how the university works?.....

16. Have you personally spoken to one or more of your lecturers yet?.....	Yes	No			
17. Have you personally spoken to a tutor yet?.....	Yes	No			
18. Do you understand what the lecturers expect of you?.....	Yes	No			
19. Are you worried about your semester tests?.....	Yes	No			
20. How many hours per day outside of class time have you been studying?.....	Yes	No			
21. How many classes and tutorials do you miss in a normal week?.....					
	Classes	Tutorials			
22. Where do you currently live?.....	On Campus	Home	A commune	With family	Other
23. How far from campus do you currently live?					
	On campus	Within walking distance	A short drive away (30 minutes or less)	A long drive away (more than 30 minutes)	
24. Are you happy where you currently live?.....					
25. Do you have transport problems?.....	Yes	No			
26. Do you have food problems?.....	Yes	No			
27. Would you like some orientation activities to be repeated later in the year?.....	Yes	No			
28. What type of transport do you mostly use to get to campus?	Yes	No			
	Taxi	Private Car	Walking	Other	

Thank you for completing the questionnaire and all the best with your studies!